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Review of *John Graves, Writer* Edited by Mark Busby and Terrell Dixon

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John Graves, Writer. Edited by Mark Busby and Terrell Dixon. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. x + 266 pp. Photographs, bibliography, index. \$34.95.

A geographical accident, Texas lumps together High Plains and Gulf tropics, western deserts and eastern bayous. The writings of John Graves (chiefly known for *Goodbye to a River*) mirror these incompatibles, relentlessly probing their transitions and significance, including their human significance. His is a perpetually thoughtful prose.

The first section of *John Graves, Writer* contains discussions with friends and associates plus a long interview. The second is a “festschrift” celebrating his life and writings. An essay on his relations with *Texas Monthly* magazine appears here, backed up by a second essay on this topic in the next section, which consists largely of critical essays on environmentalism, gender, and racism and colonialism in the Southwest.

The first two sections, at least for this reviewer, contain interesting insights but are

too much the testimonies of a Good Old Boys Network involving far more hero worship than Graves can possibly feel comfortable with. The critical essays in the final section cut wider and deeper.

Alex Hunt's exploration of Graves's two-sided environmentalism strikes a nice balance between seeing Graves as an advocate of the environment (an environmental writer) or as an artist describing man's relationships to nature (a nature writer). James Langston explores the issue of gender in Graves's writings (and in the culture of the Southwest generally), noting his telling descriptions of female characters. Betsy Berry, by contrast, takes up the gender issue again and asks pointed questions about the male-centered Gravesian world. Using a novel by Beverly Lowry (*The Perfect Sonya*) based on Graves himself, she easily demonstrates the striking lack of feminine characters and viewpoints in his work. In "Contested Landscapes" Barbara J. Cook makes clear the not always edifying power of a culture that took over the land and so far as possible forced its own values on the occupants. Graves, she sees, realizes that all who come from that history take up the burden of its violence whether they wish to or not. Morally, we never begin from an imagined clean state, and we must not imagine that we do.

John Graves's descriptions of the land and people at the interstices of the Great Plains and the brushwood/limestone country to its south are among the best that have been written. Those interested in his writing can find pointed and accurate accounts of his work in this volume, along with incisive reflections on its content and meaning. The bibliography, if not complete, is extensive and would prove essential to any scholar examining Graves and his career. The photographs are wide-ranging and carry their own burden of insight.

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